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## THE DESIRE FOR IMMORTALITY.

IN the *Fortnightly Review* for October there appeared a fresh and interesting article, by Mr. F. C. S. Schiller, called, "Do men desire Immortality?" The writer attempts to show that at the present day among cultivated and semi-cultivated persons in Europe and America, there is no real longing for a future life. It is still considered the proper thing to assume that we all desire it and frequently think about it, but Mr. Schiller believes that it is not difficult to show that this assumption has little or no basis in reality.

Men live their lives without reference to death or to the life which death may bring: when "the ordinary man for the first time truly realizes that *his* days are numbered," it is usually a "tremendous shock." The future life and its conditions are seldom written or talked about; it is bad form to dwell on death in conversation, except in a most casual and distant way; the Society for Psychical Research has a very limited number of subscribers; "Spiritism," which, unlike all other religions, "treats the future life as a hard (and somewhat crude) fact, and not as a mere dogma of faith," has not become a success. "Christian Science" may be foolish, fraudulent, or false, but its vogue shows that it answers to a want. The failure of "Spiritism" shows that it does not.

To what is this supposed lack of interest in the chance or prospect of a future life really due? Mr. Schiller is not wholly clear about this part of his subject. First of all, so far as I understand him, men actually believe less. A future life is not exactly denied, but it is a mere vision which

floats before the eye of faith at certain seasons of unhappiness or pain, and is then comfortably forgotten. "Men no longer dream themselves in Heaven nor dread themselves in Hell." But, secondly, men on the whole like this life on earth so well that they do not *want* even to think of another. They wish to postpone death as long as possible, and meanwhile to ignore it. This feeling, Mr. Schiller holds, grows stronger with age, and he even goes so far as to say that "the only sort of future life which would have any attraction for the old would be one in which they could go on very much as on earth"<sup>1</sup>. Thirdly, we are told that men do not want to know the truth about a future life because, while it would not make them die the sooner, it would be *inconvenient*. People would have to "act on their knowledge, and that might upset the habits of a lifetime." It is not clear what is meant by this. Are we to suppose that if I *knew* that my personal consciousness would continue or be revived after death, I should live a nobler life? Or is Mr. Schiller referring to future punishments and rewards? He does not say. Fourthly,

<sup>1</sup> Jowett says: "The wicked man, when old, is not, as Plato supposes, more agitated by the terrors of another world when he is nearer to them, nor the good in an ecstasy at the joys of which he is soon to be the partaker. Age numbs the sense of both worlds; and the habit of life is strongest in death. Even the dying mother is dreaming of her lost children as they were forty or fifty years before, 'pattering over the boards,' not of reunion with them in another state of being. Most persons, when the last hour comes, are resigned to the order of nature and the will of God. . . . Nature, like a kind mother or nurse, lays us to sleep without frightening us; physicians, who are the witnesses of such scenes, say that, under ordinary circumstances, there is no fear of the future. Often, as Plato tells us, death is accompanied 'with pleasure.' When the end is still uncertain, the cry of many a one has been, 'Pray that I may be taken.' The last thoughts even of the best men depend chiefly on the accidents of their bodily state. Pain soon overpowers the desire of life; old age, like the child, is laid to sleep almost in a moment. The long experience of life will often destroy the interest which mankind have in it." (*Dialogues of Plato*, vol. II, pp. 176, 181, 3rd ed.) The feelings of old people towards the future life are surely more subtle and various than Mr. Schiller would seem to allow.

there still half-unconsciously lurks over the whole subject a certain discomfort or uneasiness. It is uncanny. In regard to it, it is especially true that "Society entertains a fierce fear of knowledge, a savage suspicion that to eat of the fruits of the tree of knowledge is a sin deserving of death." Hence the subject is guarded and kept away by a vigorous social taboo. Hence too, as Mr. Schiller supposes, the real reasons, which man is partly ashamed and partly afraid to confess (and partly, too, he successfully deceives himself) have engendered a number of mock reasons and pretences. To inquire into these things is said to be a "morbid craving." It may lead to insanity. It encourages fraud. It is unscientific, because you are dealing with a subject which lies outside the boundaries of legitimate science. It is irreligious, because religion says that you are to take the future life upon trust, as a dogma of faith or an assurance of revelation. It is irrational because you are asking the answer to a question which on earth can never be known.

In its issue of September 7 the *Spectator* makes, to my mind, various powerful replies to Mr. Schiller's arguments. I will quote much of what the *Spectator* says in lieu of saying some of the same things less cogently myself:—

Mr. Schiller forgets, we think, that there are questions about which men are silent because they are too deeply interested to discuss them, and that reverence produces in this respect precisely the same result as indifference. Nobody in Germany, or at least none of the educated class, would publicly discuss the character of the Emperor, much less make it the subject of free newspaper discussion, least of all move for a Committee to investigate it by cross-examination or otherwise, yet to every politician it is matter of the deepest interest, of much thought, and of perpetual inquiry. That an enormous number of men try to avoid thinking of the future life is true, and has been true in all ages, but that is because they are afraid of it as too weighty, too absorbing, too fatal to immersion in the business of daily life, not because they think it of second-rate importance. If it is not so, how does it happen that religion, which is only the study of what is to follow after death, and how to make the state which succeeds death pleasant

or unpleasant, is of all subjects that which most deeply divides mankind, and on which opinion is considered most important, not only as regards the future but as regards the present? What else but interest in the future state, or things directly connected therewith, divides Catholic and Protestant? We should say, in exact opposition to Mr. Schiller, that an immense majority have the greatest difficulty in turning their thoughts from it, and that anybody who brought them any fresh and clear light about it, or even professed to bring it, would receive the most eager attention. The real reason why men do not investigate the question of what follows after death, as they investigate secular problems, is that they are convinced that investigation can have no result, that light can come only from revelation, and that consequently the thing to investigate is the truth or falsehood of whatever professes to contain that revelation. Surely there is interest enough in that; why all society, all the systems of life prevalent throughout the world, are based on that, and the conclusions deduced from that. That men do not inquire carefully enough into the phenomena of spiritualism may be true—the present writer thinks it is true—but the reason is hopelessness of obtaining light by that method, not indifference to light if obtainable. Let men but see a reasonable hope, and till the hope was dispelled nothing else would attract their attention at all. Politics, business, pleasure, all would be forgotten in the presence of so absorbing an interest. The thing has happened in history several times, and whenever it has occurred the moving force governing the peoples and constantly producing religious wars has been interest in the “Whither.”

Some things in this long quotation might be contested, and others might be differently expressed, but I venture to think that in the first sentence there is a great deal of truth. “There are questions about which men are silent because they are too deeply interested to discuss them.” And there is even more than this involved. The late Master of Balliol truly observed: “At the approach of death there is not much said: good men are too honest to go out of the world professing more than they know. There is perhaps no important subject about which, at any time, even religious people speak so little to one another.” Why do they, however, Mr. Schiller would say, not *want* to know? Mr. Schiller seems rather

disposed to laugh at the way in which the religions, responsive to man's fears and apprehensions, have expressly disavowed the obligation of raising the dogma of faith to positive knowledge. But it may be questioned whether the disavowal does not correspond to a higher feeling than fear or inconvenience. Do we not regard immortality much in the same way as we regard God? God is not a fact among other facts. He is not an object of knowledge. He is the condition of knowledge. We believe in him; we do not "know" him, as we know that wool comes from the sheep's back. To search for God or to prove him by ordinary scientific processes seems absurd and vulgar. And with the future life the same feeling holds good. If I *knew* that there was a future life, it would not be inconvenient to me. The *kind* of life I lead at present on earth would not be changed: I doubt whether scientific knowledge would influence my life otherwise than my present mental condition, which may be said to oscillate between hope and faith, affects it, but if it did, it could only affect me (I suppose) in making me live better or yield less often to temptation. And in that case knowledge would be not inconvenient but useful and welcome. But how can one have a *knowledge* of the future life that is not vulgarizing? For whatever that life may be, it seems obvious that it is not lived under conditions of sense. Whatever knowledge could be obtained about it here, must be dragged down and accommodated to sensuous limitations. I do not by any means deny that there have been real communications from the spirit world, but if these communications were real they have (so far as I am aware) also been cheap and unsatisfying. And how can this be otherwise so long as our earthly conditions continue? Mr. Schiller seems to think that if you do not care to *try* to communicate with the beloved dead, this must be due either to the fact that you do not really and intensely believe that they are still alive and conscious, or that your love has grown cold. The cynical story which he tells with some satisfaction on p. 436 seems to show that

this is his meaning. Forcing myself to be truthful, so far as I can, I still disagree with him. I know of a lady who in a state of trance speaks words and gives messages which no theory of chance or fraud can apparently explain. Why was I disinclined to be taken to see her? So far as I can read my own mind, it was not because I disbelieved in her trances and thought them rubbish and fraudulent (though I did not intensely believe in them), not because I thought such communications with the dead sinful or harmful, not because my interest in and love for certain dead persons had waxed cold, and finally not because I did not believe that they were still "conscious" and alive, but because the whole thing seemed to me so vulgar and demeaning. What could I hear that would be *really* spiritual? The conditions made that impossible. I could not bear the idea that a third person, even in a trance (and I fully believed that the medium was unconscious of what she said) should be the bearer of unsatisfying communications between the beloved and me. The noble words of Mr. Browning seemed applicable in quite another sense than that in which he wrote them:—

Is the remainder of the way so long,

Thou need'st the little solace, thou the strong?

Watch out thy watch, let weak ones doze and dream.

I preferred to wait for the time, when, if God see well, spirit may draw nigh to spirit without intermediary or interruption. If death mean the destruction of consciousness, then indeed the results of those trances must be, one would suppose, either accidental or fraudulent. If death be not the destruction of consciousness, I can afford to wait. Just in proportion as the belief in a future life is closely connected with the belief in God, does our faith in it share the qualities of our faith in him. To *know* would deprive faith of its rapture and its glory—there is a glory of knowledge and there is a glory of faith,—and as with our belief in God, so with our belief in immortality.

That educated persons desire a future life seems to me more certain than to Mr. Schiller. Here again I will first quote the *Spectator* :—

At present, when new creeds are manufactured every year, they all profess to affirm a future; and true agnosticism, though it spreads among the educated, takes little hold upon the body of any people. The hope of a better world may be vague, but it *is* always a hope, and a hope implies a wish. The hope, indeed, seems to increase rather than decrease as belief in dogma dies away, the truth being, we fancy, that as the supreme dogma, the existence of a personal God, becomes more lonely, the confidence in God as necessarily good increases, and produces the belief, so startlingly strong among the masses, that he will grant compensation for the injustices of this world. There must be a wish to live again behind that faith. The writer would be inclined to say, as the result of his personal observation, that the doubt of a future state is strongest among the happy, the unhappy clinging to it as their only consolation. As those who are unhappy, at least at intervals, are infinitely the more numerous, Mr. Schiller's question on his theory answers itself. Moreover, human instincts, bad or good, are facts to be always taken account of, and it is difficult to imagine that the universally diffused fear of death can exist without, what is really an extension of it, the fear of extinction. The answer that men do not dread sleep, but rather seek it as a refuge, is no answer at all, for we all instinctively think of sleep as a condition sure to have an awakening. It is often assumed that suicides must expect death to be the end, but the evidence is directly to the contrary, for suicides die every day hoping or praying that God will forgive them, though, if death is extinction, prayer and hope are alike absurd formulas. We cannot but think that the great majority of men expect a future state, and would gladly, if they knew how, pierce the veil which God for some purpose we none of us perceive has dropped between our minds and any knowledge of our *kind* of future condition.

The last sentence of this quotation seems to me to need modification in accordance with what has previously been said. I am also not quite sure as to what the *Spectator* says about the fear of death. Mr. Schiller has, I think, left that fear too much out of account in speaking of the common disinclination to talk and think about death except in an external sort of way. What is feared is not



so much extinction as the *process* of death. Will it hurt? What does it feel like? Even if we fully believe that there will be a continuance or revival of consciousness, still to get to this new life we must pass through the gates of death. And it is this passing through of which every now and then we feel a dread. We sometimes shrink from the thought of death not because we care so intensely for our present life, not because we fear non-existence, and certainly not because we are afraid of "punishment" (that feeling might perhaps even wisely be less dormant than it is!), but because we are frightened of the actual process or moments of dying.

In order "to test and bring out the feelings with which the prospect of a future life is actually regarded at the present day," the American branch of the Society for Psychical Research has issued "a circular or *questionnaire*," dealing with the subject in some detail. The answers to the circular are, for England, to be sent to Mr. Schiller at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and "all names will be regarded as strictly confidential." In the remainder of this paper I shall attempt to answer the *questionnaire*, and the appearance of my article in this REVIEW means that I can answer it with sincerity. It is quite true that I may sometimes be self-deceived. The *Spectator* says: "People are not truthful enough to themselves to make such a return of much value." All I can say is, I have done my best.

The text of the circular runs as follows:—

- I. Would you prefer (a) to live after "death" or (b) not?
- II. (a) If I (a), do you desire a future life whatever the conditions may be?
- (b) If not, what would have to be its character to make the prospect seem tolerable? Would you, e.g., be content with a life more or less like your present life?
- (c) Can you say what elements in life (if any) are felt by you to call for its perpetuity?
- III. Can you state *why* you feel in this way, as regards questions I and II?

- IV. Do you now feel the question of a future life to be of urgent importance to your mental comfort?
- V. Have your feelings on questions I, II, and IV undergone change? If so, when and in what ways?
- VI. (a) Would you like to *know for certain* about the future life, or (b) would you prefer to leave it a *matter of faith*?

To the first question: "Would you prefer to live after death or not?" I reply in the affirmative. To the first part of question II the answer seems to be as clear. If, for instance, I were supernaturally informed that for my unorthodoxy and other defects I was either to be annihilated at death or condemned to perpetual torments, it is obvious that annihilation would be preferable.

Difficulties begin with II (b). The character of the future life is, and must always be, wholly unknown to us. Whatever else it may be, it must be utterly (and not merely "more or less") unlike the present life. Therefore I am totally unable to make up a "character" for it which would make its "prospect . . . tolerable." One can of course speak in generalities and negatives, and say that for another life to be desired there must be moral and mental development, or an increasing love of God; but, after all, such wide conditions carry one a very little way. Because it seems to me that "the truest conception which we can form of a future life is a state of progress or education," therefore doubtless these conditions suggest themselves to my mind. But one's habitual attitude is rather to leave the matter in the hands of God. We earnestly hope that it may please him to grant unto us the chance of deeper love and fuller knowledge, but beyond this we do not go.

I am not sure that I understand the meaning of II (c). I find it difficult to believe in an all-wise and all-good God without clinging also to the doctrine of immortality. The problem of sin, of idiocy, of madness and of misery press otherwise too heavily upon me. A future life seems more necessary for the bad than for the good, not that they may be punished, but that they may have "a better chance."

I am also influenced by the usual arguments about human reason and human love, though in a less degree. I sometimes venture to hope that the intense puzzles about savages, about the Australian aborigines for instance, may find their solution in another life. I believe in "immortality," not because I desire it, but because it seems to be the necessary corollary of my belief in a righteous God. If a divine voice should say: "There is no immortality for you, but God is righteous all the same," I sometimes feel as if I should be satisfied and at rest.

Perhaps it may seem strange that I have said nothing about meeting again those whom we have loved and lost upon earth. But it does not seem to me as if the desire for reunion, however strong or legitimate, is one of the "elements in life" which "call for its perpetuity." Divine righteousness *must*, as it seems to me, grant "another life" to the idiot, or to the woman who by man's intolerable villany has been condemned to a life on earth of agonizing shame, misery and ruin, but I cannot see that this perfect righteousness *must* grant *me* a conscious reunion with the beloved dead, though I earnestly hope that such may be the case.

I find it extremely difficult to answer III. I observe that in the remarks which precede the *questionnaire* it is stated that there "may be a marked divergence between conviction or belief and *sentiment*." It is, however, personal "preferences, *sentiments*, or desires" which are to be elicited by the circular, quite irrespective of religious faith or<sup>1</sup> reasoned convictions, "the influence of which, where it exists, may be recorded in answer to question III." But in my own case faith and sentiment correspond. In other words, my "sentiments" are not suffered to grow beyond my "faith." Hence "why I feel in this way, as regards I and II," so far as I can extract any intelligible

<sup>1</sup> The *Fortnightly Review*, p. 440, has "religious faith of reasoned convictions," but I conclude that "of" is a mere misprint for "or."

and intelligent answers from my mind, has practically been mentioned already. Perhaps I ought to add that I do not desire to live after death because I am unhappy on earth. Nor does it seem to me that such a desire, based on the wish for fuller knowledge, for self-purification, for continued progress, and for reunion with the beloved dead, is inconsistent with a very vividly felt regret for the life on earth. Mr. Schiller has hardly taken this dual feeling into account. If I have to leave a home where I have spent many years of mingled joy and sorrow for another, I may leave it full of hope and interest in the new and unknown future, but yet also with feelings of wistful sadness. If I were stricken to-day with a mortal disease and knew that I had only a year to live, I should feel a regret that does not seem to me inconsistent with a very real faith in a desire for immortality. The question, Would you prefer to die now or in (say) ten years' time? and the question, Would you prefer, whenever you do die, to live again or to become extinct? must surely be kept apart. The life of the butterfly may be higher than the caterpillar's, but the caterpillar's life may contain joys peculiarly its own. And not merely joys, but even tender sorrows, quaintnesses, humours, which cannot possibly recur. One sometimes thinks: Shall we laugh in another life? Surely it is consonant with the goodness and wisdom of God, that he has made us, under normal circumstances, like and be interested in *this* life, even though it be *also* the preparation for another.

Question IV, by implication, has been answered already. If I can imagine that a divine revelation informed me that individual consciousness did continue after death, I should, I suppose, rejoice that my faith was confirmed; but somehow or other the supposition of something which I believe to be impossible (i. e. the authenticated divine revelation) produces no effect upon my mind. I cannot clearly imagine how I should feel if something happened which I do not believe could happen. Again, if the supposed divine re-

velation informed me that God in his infinite wisdom and goodness did not grant individual consciousness after death, it would not, I think, make any marked difference to my manner of life. It would still seem best, and most in accordance with the divine will, to live worthily to-day, though we are utterly extinguished to-morrow. One would be less ready to die, sorrier to lose what was to be one's only chance of consciousness, of knowledge, of love. But though one's own life, which has been formed under the stimulus of the belief in immortality, might not be greatly changed, I should feel that mankind had received a blow from which it could hardly hope to recover. Jowett said: "The denial of the belief takes the heart out of human life: it lowers men to the level of the material." "Mental comfort" is such an odd phrase; but what I have already said proves that the question of a future life does enter greatly into my working conception of the world. It is so closely connected with my faith in a righteous God that the one seems to follow from the other. And if, *per impossibile*, I make the supposition that I have learned from a divine and certain source that the righteous God is, but that there is no survival after death, then, though my own life might not be changed, yet life's most precious hope and consolation would be gone. My own self would seem unutterably poorer. Therefore I think I may truthfully answer IV in the affirmative.

But here I wish to make a remark which may seem utterly inconsistent with all that has hitherto been said. I hope that I may retain my identity at death, and that I may enjoy a conscious reunion with the beloved dead. But I am not prepared to say that I always and absolutely identify a future life with the survival of individual consciousness and memory. Jowett has said:—

We must also acknowledge that there are degrees of the belief in immortality, and many forms in which it presents itself to the mind. Some persons will say no more than that they trust in God, and that they leave all to him. It is a great part of true religion

not to pretend to know more than we do. Others when they quit this world are comforted with the hope "that they will see and know their friends in heaven." But it is better to leave them in the hands of God, and to be assured that "no evil shall touch them." There are others again to whom the belief in a divine personality has ceased to have any longer a meaning; yet they are satisfied that the end of all is not here, but that something still remains to us, "and some better thing for the good than for the evil." They are persuaded, in spite of their theological nihilism, that the ideas of justice and truth and holiness and love are realities. They cherish an enthusiastic devotion to the first principles of morality. Through these they see, or seem to see, darkly, and in a figure, that the soul is immortal.—*Dialogues of Plato*, vol. II, p. 180, 3rd ed.

I do not understand how the righteous God can grant us immortality without continuity of individual consciousness, but how can *I* understand the methods of God? For "we acknowledge that these are the things which eye hath not seen nor ear heard, and therefore it hath not entered into the heart of man in any sensible manner to conceive them" (Jowett, *ibid.*, p. 182). But whatever immortality may mean, the belief in it rests (to my mind) on the belief in God. "If there is a good and wise God, then there is a progress of mankind towards perfection; and if there is no progress of men towards perfection, then there is no good and wise God. We cannot suppose that the moral government of God, of which we see the beginnings in the world and in ourselves, will cease when we pass out of life" (Jowett, *ibid.*, p. 180).

I have nothing much to say in answer to V. In my own family we were very wholesomely brought up in regard to these matters. We were told that God was good and forgiving. He might indeed punish us for our sins, but only as a loving father would punish his sons. Such punishments would be temporary and disciplinary. The notion of eternal punishment and of a material hell was openly scouted. Rightly or wrongly, it was called un-Jewish. The future life never had any terrors for us, only attractions. Yet so far as I remember, we did not dwell

on it very greatly. As I grew up the usual doubts began, but these doubts seldom or ever extended to the fundamental doctrine of the righteous God and to that which ever seemed its corollary, the doctrine of a future life. Just before or just after I went to Oxford, I read Jowett's essay on the Immortality of the Soul, and it seemed to me then, as it seems to me now, the truest and wisest thing that ever had been, or could be, said upon the subject. Since I read it, my opinions have never changed, and if I have read it once, I have read it fifty times. The exquisite final sections (added in the *third* edition of the Plato) are quoted in full in my *florilegium*, "The Religious Teaching of Jowett" (*J. Q. R.*, vol. XII, pp. 372-374).

I had already dealt with question VI before I attempted the *questionnaire*. How am I to "know for certain" about the future life? I imagine the implied answer is by investigation and inquiry, not by fresh and novel revelation. How investigation and inquiry can "make me know for certain," I do not at present understand. Even beyond accident and fraud, there may still conceivably be explanations of supposed proofs which would deprive them of all validity. The notion of seeking sensuous proofs for spiritual truths seems to me incongruous and unsatisfactory. It has the incurable taint of cheapening and of vulgarity. It is, as I said before, something like "proving" the existence of God. Though in moments of gloom, one might be glad to have such doubts put finally to rest, still one would feel that life had lost a certain peculiar joy. That joy is not uncertainty, but the joy of *believing* in God, the joy of *believing* that the souls of the righteous (yes, and of all mankind) are safe in his hands. Belief may be subject to ups and downs: it is now stronger, now weaker; but it yields an added richness to existence; life, on earth at any rate, would be the poorer if there were nothing but knowledge. Hence if I must answer VI without qualification one way or the other, I vote without hesitation for leaving the "future life a *matter of faith*."

I have sought to answer the circular as truly and as simply as I can. It would be a matter of great surprise to me if the majority of the replies bear out Mr. Schiller's anticipations. They will rather, I think, tend to show that our belief in the immortality of the soul has become inseparably connected with our belief in God, and that the future life is still desired both for its own sake and as the pledge and guarantee of the Eternal Righteousness.

C. G. MONTEFIORE.